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SUBJECT: KMT CHAIRMAN MA YING-JEOU'S "NEW DISCOURSE" ON
CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS: THE VIEW OF LOCAL OPINION-
MAKERS

¶1. Summary: This cable is the first of two reports looking at local media and commentators' take on Taiwan's current political environment. This one looks at Ma Ying-jeou's recent public discourse; the second will focus on Chen Shui-bian. This analysis was drafted by one of AIT's senior local employees in the Press Section based on her view of commentary over the last month. End summary.

¶2. In the wake of the KMT's landslide victory in the December 2005 island-wide elections, KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou has started to make public statements concerning his and the KMT's positions on cross-strait relations, sparking heated discussions in Taiwan. Perhaps the most daring and confusing was a KMT advertisement published in the "Liberty Times" that for the first time included "Taiwan independence" as a possible option for the Taiwan people to determine their own future. Observers are now debating whether the KMT under Ma's leadership had reversed its cross-strait policy stance and moved toward a "middle-of-the-road" direction, and whether Ma was being inconsistent or just testing the waters to attract "light-Green" voters.

¶3. Ma and almost all political observers believe he has a virtual lock on the 2008 KMT presidential nomination. Ma has always been extremely cautious in handling sensitive topics such as Taiwan's national identity, ethnic relations, and the issue of unification and independence. As a native of Hunan Province born in Hong Kong, Ma has long realized that the ethnic conundrum and his attitude toward unification/independence would be his greatest vulnerability if he decides to run for the presidency in 2008. Ma is clearly aware that he could be labeled as "pro-China" or "selling out Taiwan" (as was former KMT Chairman Lien Chan) by his pan-Green rivals if he fails to handle these issues carefully. Even before Ma was first elected Taipei mayor in 1998, he has been preparing for these potential challenges, including studying the Taiwanese and Hakka dialects; expressing concern and goodwill to the family members of victims of the 1947 February 28 Incident; refusing to criticize former President Lee Teng-hui; declining to visit mainland China; and hanging a huge portrait of an aboriginal hero outside the KMT headquarters building.

14. Before the December 2005 island-wide local elections, Ma rarely elaborated on his views in public on cross-Strait issues; rather, he made only brief and fractional comments on this topic when he could not avoid comment altogether. Now Ma faces a contrary problem: he has said too much. Ma's major statements on cross-Strait relations since the election include: his last mid-December interview with "Newsweek," in which he said unification with China is "the KMT's ultimate goal;" his article entitled "Taiwan's Pragmatic Path" published in the "Asian Wall Street Journal"; several speeches delivered during his recent Europe visit elaborating on his vision on the future development of cross-Strait relations. Some critics, as a result, are criticizing Ma for throwing out a series of contradictory statements on cross-Strait relations, without any clear consistent approach now, with the presidential elections still two years away. Others, however, including some high-ranking KMT officials, said these sensitive and controversial issues are like rashes, and that it is better for Ma to deal with them now in order to gain immunity later than to get hit by them in the run up to the 2007 and 2008 legislative and presidential elections.

15. When Chen Shui-bian visited London in December 1999, as he was about to run for the presidency in 2000, he gave a speech at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) on "The New Middle Road for Taiwan: A New Perspective." In February 2006, Ma delivered a speech at LSE on "Bridging the Divide: A vision for Peace in East Asia", in which he proposed the "3-C and 2-P" theory (namely, both sides across the Taiwan Strait will move from "confrontation" to "conciliation," and eventually to "cooperation," in order to achieve "peace" and "prosperity") as a prescription for breaking the cross-

Strait impasse. It may just be a historical coincidence that Ma joined Chen in choosing the same venue, LSE, to emphasize his own "middle course" approach before the presidential election campaigns began. But Ma enjoys more space to move towards the "middle way." Each time Chen has had tried to do so, he has been pulled back to the independence extreme of the political spectrum eventually by the deep-green elements. Ma's supporters, on the other hand, show more tolerance of Ma's efforts to move towards the middle way, as they regard him as the only hope for the pan-Blue camp to regain the ruling power.

16. Jaw Shao-kang, a well-known TV/radio commentator, argued that Ma should not have expressed his pro-unification stance but rather should have limited himself to re-stating his position against Taiwan independence in line with the KMT's official position in support of "anti-independence while remaining silent about the issue of unification," a position clearly aimed at "maintaining the status quo." "The DPP's plan to push for independence while claiming it is maintaining the status quo is a move that deceives itself and others as well," Jaw said. "Unification, unlike independence, has never been an issue of importance for Taiwan now because only very few people in Taiwan support immediate unification with China. Even proponents of unification think that Taiwan and China should not unify until conditions are ripe," Jaw added. Academia Sinica Institute of Social Science Assistant Research Fellow Hsu Yung-ming, on the other hand, was quoted as saying that Ma's attempt to pull himself out of the confusion created by his unification comment has actually pushed him and the KMT deeper into the confusion and, as a result, helped Chen dampen the controversy sparked by Chen's proposal to abolish the NUC and NUG. Other academic commentators argued that Ma's emphasis on the "pragmatic path" was intended to

clarify his position to Washington. Tsai Wei, a professor at National Chengchi University's Institute of International Relations, maintained that the U.S. prefers Taiwan leaders who support Taiwan independence but have the foresight to refrain from publicly declaring this support in order to meet the U.S. national interests of "no war, no peace, no unification, and no independence in the Taiwan Strait." Chairman Ma, Tsai observed, "is trying to remove U.S. doubts that he might get too close with China."

17. Ma's unilateral decision to acknowledge independence as one of the options for Taiwan people, however, invited internal criticism and spawned division in his own camp. Former KMT Chairman Lien Chan openly criticized Ma's statement, while KMT Legislative Yuan (LY) President Wang Jin-pyng, who himself promoted independence as one option for Taiwan during his own unsuccessful run for the KMT chairmanship against Ma last July, also challenged Ma's one-man and top-to-down decision-making style. The pan-Green camp, on the other hand, rejoined that Ma's recent moves reflect his opportunist efforts to attract "light-Green" DPP supporters and enhance his image as a moderate presidential candidate who seeks a new "middle way" or "pragmatic path."

18. Some analysts, however, praised Ma's new stance on cross-Strait relations. "China Times Weekly" Chief Editor Wang Mei-yu said in a TV talk show program that Ma is the first KMT chairman to publicly acknowledge that Taiwan independence can be one of the possible options for the Taiwan people to decide their own future and to invite family members of the 1947 February 28 incident victims to attend a KMT Central Standing Committee meeting. "The DPP's recent moves, from Chen's Lunar New Year's Day proposal to scrap the National Unification Council (NUC) and National Unification Guidelines (NUG) to the government's release of a new research report naming Nationalist Party's Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek as the chief perpetrator responsible for the slaughter of over 10,000 Taiwan people in the February 28 Incident," Wang noted, "target Ma himself." By putting independence, unification and status quo as options for the Taiwan people, Ma attempted to build a political firewall around himself.

19. Compared to his predecessors, Wang continued, Ma has demonstrated a completely different style of leadership. "He chose to directly face, rather than dodge, the 'dark corners' hidden deep in KMT history, including the February 28 Incident and White Terror, and even acknowledged the need for the Taiwan people to include independence as one of its possible options," Wang added. A "China Times" news analyst wrote that Ma has remained consistent in his political philosophy since serving as a ranking official at the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) 16 years ago, where he helped draft guidelines establishing the NUC. The new KMT chairman has "openly talked about something that his predecessors Lien Chan and even Lee Teng-hui chose to keep unsaid."

10. Ma demonstrated his posture as a probable presidential candidate by making some bold statements, for a KMT Chairman, in the course of his speech on cross-Strait relations at the LSE. Ma, nevertheless, did dodge some critical and sensitive questions in his discourse. He did not, for example, tell the Taiwan people whether the KMT will accept the decision if a majority of Taiwan people choose that Taiwan should declare independence. In addition, Ma also failed to propose concrete means and strategies on how to lead both sides of the Taiwan Strait from "confrontation" to "conciliation," and eventually to "cooperation."

¶11. However one assesses Ma's statements on independence and unification, it is clear that he has taken the first steps toward laying out his campaign platform for 2008. Many wonder, however, why he started so early and why he stepped immediately into the DPP's favorite set of issues.

KEEGAN